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A spy, and his secrets, are buried

CIA chief William Casey's death leaves a host of unanswered questions about the Iran-Contra affair and other intrigues

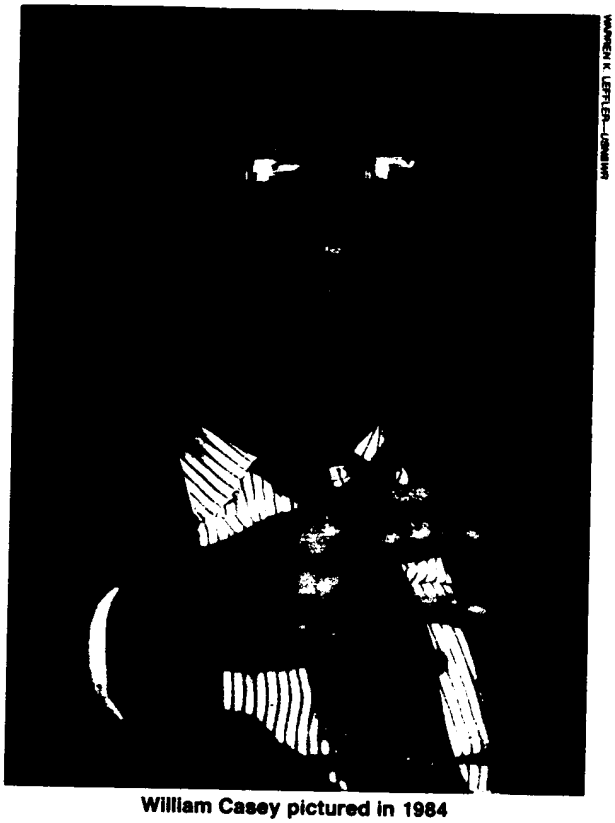
■ Whether it was a heart-to-heart talk over dinner with KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko, a tense bargaining session in his suburban Virginia home with Pakistani strong man Mohammed Zia or a walk with a Contra commander in the Honduran bush, William Casey was a man who hammered out his own deals and had little use for messengers and middle men. A self-made millionaire, the veteran spy master had no patience for the finer points of consensus building and was wont, even in the most delicate matters, to plow ahead on his own. "People raised in a bureaucratic atmosphere did not understand him," says a Central Intelligence Agency officer who worked with Casey. "He was a big man with little patience." He also kept plenty to himself. As a result, when Casey died last week at age 74 from pneumonia, an untold number of secrets died with him.

Chief among them is the genesis of the arms sales to Iran and the diversion of money to the Contras. "Had someone else been Reagan's CIA director, the Iran-Contra flap would not have taken place," says a veteran of covert action going back to World War II. "Bill was the kingpin of the operation. With him testifying in Congress, we could have learned the truth about the entire affair." Even as members of the congressional panels heard testimony about Casey's involvement in the arms and money transactions, they eulogized him for his patriotism and service to the nation, and some expressed the fear that, in death, he would shoulder a disproportionate share of the responsibility for the scandal. "With Casey dead," says a White House insider, "everything will be blamed on him."

Funding insurgencies

It is already clear that Casey was among those who could have provided some of the best information on the President's involvement in the affair. It was he, after all, who discussed foreign policy with Reagan at least once a week. And it was the CIA director who, as project manager of the Reagan Doctrine, made the decisions assigning resources to anti-Communist insurgencies. Before the Congress cut off aid to the Contras, Casey, as far back as August, 1983, was ordering the Pentagon to ship over $100 million in weapons. The project was code-named "Elephant Herd," and it was only after lengthy argument that the Pentagon whittled down the amount to $12 million. Among many in American intelligence circles, the Nicaraguan conflict is still known as "Casey's war."

In Angola, Casey warmed quickly to Jonas Savimbi and flew to Zaire to set up the support program for Savimbi's UNITA guerrillas. Elsewhere, Casey was personally involved in establishing an aid program for the Afghan rebels. In 1982, for instance, he persuaded Saudi Arabia to match the $250 million in U.S. assistance, helping to make the rebels a formidable foe of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. In the six years he presided over CIA's sprawling headquarters in Langley, Va., 12 miles outside Washington, Casey visited as many trouble spots as he could, and his personal safety seemed to be of no concern to him. No CIA director traveled nearly as much and as widely. And though it is known that he helped place new signal intelligence facilities in Asia, the Middle East and the South Pacific, there is no record of his conversations with his agents in the field, many of whom were hired under his expansion program. Casey was on the road a third of the time. So the number of secrets buried with him could be very large indeed.



WARREN K. LEFFLER—USN&WR

William Casey pictured in 1984

Over time, some of those secrets may come to light through other channels. It is known, for example, that Casey became personally involved in repeated attempts to free William Buckley, the CIA's station chief in Lebanon, who was taken hostage, tortured and killed. Details are murky, but intelligence sources say the information extracted from Buckley before he died may have resulted in a serious security breach. Casey, whose public abrasiveness was a legend, was as distressed by Buckley's personal plight as by the security loss.

In the peculiar world of official Washington, a person is most remembered for the last post he held. For Bill Casey, who had a distinguished career as a scholar, editor and businessman, it was a stroke of good luck that his first and last job was the one he most loved. He had started in the spy game at age 30 with the old Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the CIA. His assignment was to parachute U.S. spies behind Nazi lines, and his motto was "We have the enemy; let's get on with the battle."

Nearly four decades later, at an age when most other people retire, Casey told his friend Ronald Reagan, whom he served as campaign chief in 1980, that he wanted to get back into the battle. He became the first CIA director since Allen Dulles with a presidential mandate to build up and expand the network of U.S. intelligence. When a friend asked the CIA director a few years ago what aspect of his career he enjoyed most, Casey replied, "Dropping spies into Germany." Unfortunately for Casey and the country, the Sandinistas and the ayatollahs proved far trickier enemies than the Nazis. ■

by Charles Fenyvesi with
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